

# Nuisance black bears: A human creation



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On a Wednesday night in the foothill community of Monrovia, homeowners roll their garbage cans out to the street for pick-up the next morning. Late that night, up and down the street, dogs bark in a crazed frenzy unlike anything their owners have heard before. Early

*By Amy Brinkhaus*

Thursday morning, a resident steps outside to pick up his morning paper and is greeted by an upsetting scene. Fifteen consecutive garbage cans have been knocked over and their



**Left, *Ursus americanus*. Above, black bear at the top of a powerpole. Below, a bear's natural behavior can be corrupted by humans.**



*DFG photos by staff*

contents have been strewn throughout the neighborhood. A teenage prank? No - it's just an opportunistic urban black bear.

Increasing reports of bears raiding garbage cans, eating pet food from porches, swimming in backyard pools, and walking down the street in broad daylight prompted Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to initiate a study that would investigate the characteristics of this urban black bear population in order to find ways to decrease human bear conflicts. DFG plans to use the results to evaluate its black bear policy.

DFG used telemetry to track six radio-collared bears from July 1998 through December 1999. Four of the bears were captured in culvert traps set in the driveways of neighborhoods experiencing frequent bear visits. Two bears were darted out of front yard trees where they were discovered napping in the middle of the day. The study area included the foothill communities of Arcadia, Monrovia, Bradbury, Duarte, Azusa, Glendora, San Dimas, La Verne, and Claremont, as well as the Mt. Baldy and Arroyo Seco Ranger Districts of the San Gabriel Mountains, located in Los Angeles County.

During the course of the study, many homeowners expressed very different views about the bear problem and the bear study. Some believed that DFG should just leave the bears alone, saying that it was a treat to see wildlife in their backyards. One resident was so adamant that she sabotaged a culvert trap. Other homeowners felt like prisoners in their own homes, unable to step outside for fear of running into a bear passing through the yard. Some felt that the bears should just be killed. But the bears had yet to pose a threat to anyone or to damage property, and their presence alone did not warrant lethal measures. Besides, removal of one bear would just allow another bear to move in. None of these options presented a reasonable solution to the problem, yet DFG still had a public safety obligation as the number of human-bear conflicts were increasing.

The majority of people wanted a solution to the problem that would not harm the bears. Residents frequently asked why DFG could not just move the bears somewhere else. DFG's black bear policy states that bears that are repeated nuisances (which was the case with all of the adult bears in the area) are not candidates for relocation due to their habituation to people. Numerous studies have proven that relocated habituated bears, regardless of the distance moved, return to the area of capture.

However, at one point during the study, two juvenile bears walked onto a school campus and raided the garbage cans. As first-time offenders not associated with causing any other problems, DFG considered them to be "no harm, no foul" bears. Because they were first time offenders, DFG decided to try relocation as a test of the policy. DFG's premise: if the bears' first experience with the city was negative, they might not return.

The first juvenile male bear was located one street over from the school and free-range darted by DFG personnel. DFG ear-tagged the tranquilized bear for future identification and drove it into the mountains along a ridge road, releasing him approximately eight kilometers northeast of the capture location. Two weeks later, a car hit the bear as he attempted to cross a major freeway while traveling away from the study area and toward another city. He did not survive.





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The next day, DFG captured the second juvenile male bear in a culvert trap in the same residential area. He was tranquilized, ear-tagged, taken into the mountains, and released in the same location as the first relocated bear before DFG had learned of the first bear's fate. One month later, a resident in a city eight kilometers due south of the release site positively identified the bear by his ear tag color and number. The juvenile had returned to an urban area. Three weeks later, the bear returned to the canyon adjacent to the original capture site, and a hunter took him.

Both juvenile bears failed to remain in the mountains where they had been relocated. They became problem bears in new areas suggesting that relocation of juvenile bears is ineffective. DFG's black bear policy for problem urban bear appears to be sound.

Data analysis showed that the urban black bear population under study had similar home range sizes and used the surrounding habitat much like black bears in non-urban settings. For the most part, the bears used the city at night when bear-human conflict would be at a minimum, and mostly during the summer months. After 18 months of study, the DFG study pointed toward a people problem, rather than a bear problem.

So, if DFG can't ignore the problem, and the bears can't be killed or relocated, what is the solution? Change the human behavior that affects the bears. DFG's current black bear policy recognizes that improper storage of attractants is a major cause of human-bear conflicts. Several community meetings were organized as a joint effort between the DFG and local police departments to educate the public about the removal of attractants. Residents who followed DFG's advice by securing garbage cans and placing them out on the street only on the morning of pick-up, bringing pet food inside, or removing ripened fruit from trees and dropped fruit from the ground reported a significant decline in bear activity in their area. Unfortunately, this only worked when all residents of an area complied.

Some residents refused to change their habits and consequently caused bear problems to continue for everyone. Some jurisdictions found that local ordinances needed to be enacted to force compliance. Los Angeles County code enables the county to cite residents who live in areas of high bear activity for failure to secure their garbage or remove pet food from the outdoors, or for purposely feeding the bears.

But the codes are not enough. More intense efforts toward public education and increased law enforcement efforts directed at removal of attractants or compliance with local ordinances will reduce human bear conflicts. DFG actively advocates responsible human behavior in bear habitat. Reducing the human-bear conflict starts with changing the only behavior that can be changed - human behavior. 🐻

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